

Swavesey Priory

What is a priory?

A priory, a monastic house under the control of a prior, was often subject to a larger abbey. Religious life operated at many levels from great abbeys (Ely, Ramsey) to modest establishments like Swavesey Priory, both for the devout, and others who sought (or could afford) an alternative to agrarian life.

The pagan Anglo-Saxons migrating to eastern Britain in the 400s initially drove out the Christianity of the failed Roman state. In the 600s, the new Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, including East Anglia, became exposed to Christianity through trade and exchange, and gradually converted. Christianity had a common appeal, and people's fears of damnation and hope for salvation were real to them.

Western monasticism was underpinned by the Rule of St Benedict established in the 500s, though there were other orders. From the 900s, local aristocrats increasingly displayed their wealth and piety by establishing small religious communities.

When was it built? Who built it?

Swavesey priory was founded by 1086. Count Alan of Brittany, son-in-law of William the Conqueror, gave it to the abbey of St Sergius and St Bacchus in Angers in France, and it may have

replaced an earlier minster church, where priests provided services for parishes without a church. Count Alan endowed the church through tithes (one tenth of all incomes paid to the church) and pastures on the Eye.

What was life like in the priory?

Monastic life was intended to be ascetic and dedicated to God. Monks and nuns vowed to follow a life of obedience, chastity and poverty. Each day the monks would attend the six offices (church services) to sing and pray. The day began at about 6 am and finished at 7 pm with matins and lauds at 2 am, though the monks would return to bed until 6 am. The ideals of the ascetic life were not always upheld and over time observance weakened. Archaeologists often find monastic burials with indications of obesity!

The church used its great wealth to build great cathedrals and monasteries. It was, with trade, the only way for able men (and mostly only men) to find advancement. For centuries it sustained literacy and numeracy necessary for administration, was an important patron of architecture, book production and illumination, charity and social support. The upper levels of the church provided national leaders and policy makers to kings.

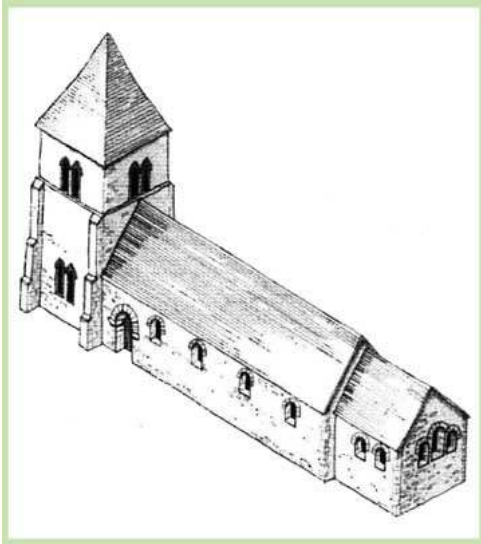
The priory and St Andrews

The priory was not wealthy, and seems never to have flourished. From about 1250 a vicar was appointed for the pastoral care of the villagers, and by 1280 there was no evidence of monks apart from the prior. The prior had a manor house near the church, and took profits from the docks and possibly rents from Market Street, acquiring land and houses, and conducting legal business through the manor court.

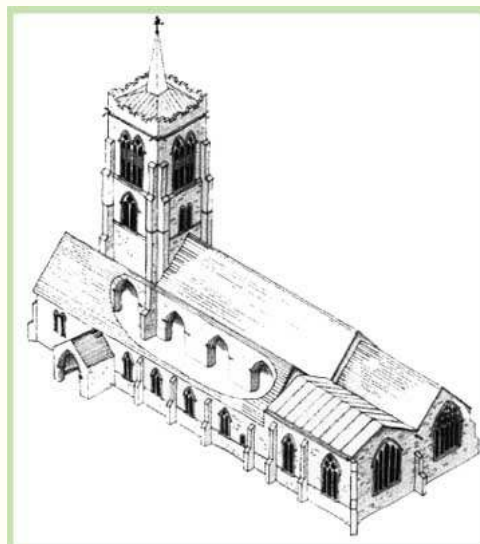
Though priors were appointed until 1391, they were mostly English monks. In 1392, the priory was granted to the Carthusian monastery in Coventry, and farmed until the Dissolution in 1539.

Little of the 1086 church is recognizable in St Andrews beyond some Anglo-Saxon work on both sides of the chancel arch. The priory buildings attached to St Andrews lay adjacent to the north. A chapel was built on the south side after 1200, and about 1300 the south aisle was widened to the same width as the chapel. The nave was rebuilt again in the 1400s and new windows inserted on the north, east and west sides. Pew ends in the north aisle are from the 1400s, and the present roof is fifteenth and sixteenth century.

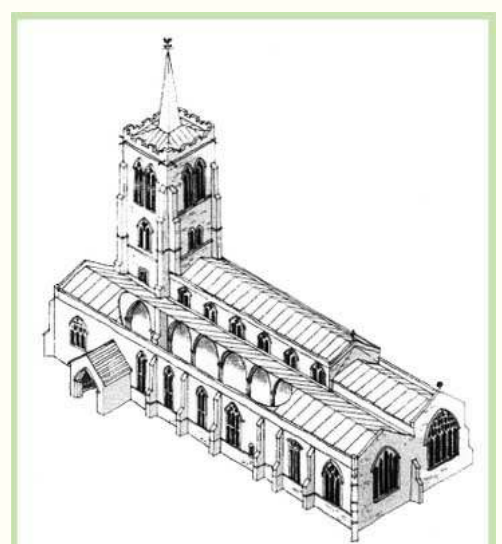
How the priory church might have appeared about 1200 AD.



How St Andrews might have appeared about 1325 AD.



How St Andrews might have appeared about 1490 AD.



This Project was undertaken by Swavesey Festival Committee, Swavesey Village College History Club, Swavesey and District History Society and Oxford Archaeology East. Young people from SVC History Club asked the questions, investigated Swavesey's mediaeval past and helped formulate the information on this board. Swavesey Parish Council supported the project which was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Cambridge Antiquarian Society.



SWAVESY
VILLAGE
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SWAVESY AND DISTRICT
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This reconstruction shows Swavesey Priory as it might have appeared in late 13th century

Acknowledgement

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